

ebb and flow to multiply by opinionhaver69

Series: [head over heels](#) [1]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, M/M, Pining, Polyamory, Polyamory Negotiations, Threesome - F/M/M

Language: English

Characters: Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2016-09-12

Updated: 2016-09-12

Packaged: 2022-04-01 20:35:09

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 1

Words: 11,744

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

And so it went: the monster was defeated, Will Byers was returned to his family, Steve got the girl, and life in Hawkins picked itself up, dusted itself off, and carried on much the same as it had before, with scarce as much as a backwards glance.

ebb and flow to multiply

Author's Note:

this is for meg, who shamelessly enabled me throughout the entire writing process! <3

way way too embarrassed to rewatch and fact-check myself so any glaring continuity errors are totally my fault, feel free to let me remain in blissful ignorance of them.

And so it went: the monster was defeated, Will Byers was returned to his family, Steve got the girl, and life in Hawkins picked itself up, dusted itself off, and carried on much the same as it had before, with scarce as much as a backwards glance.

Still, Steve couldn't help but think that maybe there was supposed to be something *more*. Something else. Walking the halls of Hawkins High didn't quite feel right, once they'd all returned after Christmas break, simply because it didn't feel any different.

Well, a few things had changed, Steve guessed. There was a memorial, now, for Nancy's friend, encased in glass in between the library and the cafeteria. It was just an old picture in a cheap faux-wooden frame, a candid shot, maybe, pulled out from somewhere; in it, she was looking out from under her lashes, turned slightly away from the camera, smiling her small, slightly embarrassed smile. It was surrounded by handwritten notes on white lined paper, pithy, overwrought eulogies from people who'd sat in classrooms with her for ten years and probably never said more than twenty words to her. The photograph itself couldn't have been much more than a year old, but the glass of the frame didn't quite hide the way it had already begun to curl and tear slightly at the edges. Looking at it made Steve feel uncomfortable, so, as a rule, he didn't; within a week of the new year he'd trained his gaze to skip mindlessly over it as though it was just another trophy case for a school team he couldn't have cared less about.

So it went.

Steve timed it so that Nancy, coming out of class, would catch sight of him leaning nonchalantly against her locker just as she rounded the corner. Her skirt swished elegantly around her knees as she picked up her pace a little, heading towards him with a bright, beautiful smile blossoming already across her angular features. Steve ducked his head in the face of it, resting his weight a little more fully on the locker where his hip was pressed, so casually contrived, against it.

“Hey there, you.”

Her voice was melodically upbeat; she leaned up on tiptoe to kiss him. Steve stood up straighter for a second, smirking down at her with his back flat against the locker, before giving in to her playful pout and stooping slightly to press his lips against hers in a chaste and fleeting kiss. When they separated, he allowed her a tiny, genuine smile of his own, almost nothing more than the barest quirk of his lips.

“Hey, yourself.” He lifted her bag out of her hands, holding it for her as she opened the locker and deposited her books inside, then wordlessly passed it back.

“Accompany me to lunch?” She took a step back and turned, holding her elbow out as though inviting him to take her arm, one eyebrow raised in a lighthearted dare. Steve rolled his eyes at her, making an exacerbated show of reluctance, but pushed himself away from the locker all the same, sliding his hand around her narrow arm and then continuing a smooth path downwards until their fingers were loosely interlaced. The crowd of milling students parted easily for them as they strolled, hand in hand, down the corridor. Secretive, Steve squeezed Nancy’s slender fingers in his, feeling gratified by the pink blush staining her cheeks and the shy, self-conscious manner in which she reached up with her free hand to tuck a loose curl behind her ear.

“So how was...” Steve hesitated, feigning forgetfulness for a second, casting his eyes upwards to the ceiling and tapping his mouth with his fingers in a melodramatic display of uncertainty, “...history?”

Nancy dug her elbow lightly into his side, not fooled. “Good, thank you. Mr Roberts thinks I have a good chance of winning the state essay competition with my composition on Abraham Lincoln, you know, the one I told you about last week?” She smiled up at him, irrepressibly, endearingly enthusiastic, her clear blue eyes sparkling like ripples on the reservoir when the early morning sunlight hit its surface. “We hear back from the judging panel next Thursday.”

Steve shook his head at her with mock disapproval and sorrow. “You know, I’m not sure my street cred will survive when word gets out that my girl’s a genius. I’ll be a nobody. I’ll have to drop out and you’ll be stuck providing for me for the rest of your life.”

“Oh, shush,” Nancy scolded him, laughing, and Steve extracted his fingers from hers, slipping his arm around her shoulders instead and pulling her affectionately into his chest. He pretended not to notice the way her expression changed, sadness sweeping over her features like a curtain drawn against a sudden chill, as they walked past Barb’s memorial and into the cafeteria.

Nancy’s lips were smooth against his, her waist soft and yielding under the insistent press of his fingertips. Steve slid his hands around the curve of her hips, guiding her back against the wall of the gymnasium, bracketing her in with his shoulders and pushing his body more firmly into hers. Nancy shuddered, lithe and appealing in his arms, then inhaled sharply, shoving him away none-too-gently and breaking their embrace. “Steve! It’s the middle of the day, people are watching.”

“Then they’re perverts and maybe we should give them a show.” Steve waggled his eyebrows at her and she scoffed, rolling her expressive eyes at him. “Yeah, I don’t think so, Steve.” She tossed her hair over her shoulder and straightened up, brushing brick dust off the back of her shirt with a careless flick of her wrist. “Anyways, I have to get back, mom’s expecting me home at five.”

Steve brought his hand up to his chest, spreading it dramatically over his heart and gesturing expansively to an imaginary audience. “See how casually she leaves me. Heartbroken, forlorn-”

“Shut up. You’re such an idiot.” Nancy shook her head fondly, pulling her bag strap further up her arm before leaning up and pressing a brief kiss to Steve’s cheek. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

She walked away, turning after a few steps to throw him a quick half-smile and a wave. Steve shot her a nonchalant salute in return, pleased by the distant sound of her laughter, then leaned back against the wall, pulling a loose cigarette out of the pocket of his bomber jacket and rooting around for a lighter. Locating one, he drew it out, cupping his hand around the end of the cigarette to shelter the flame from the wind as he lit it. The flame caught; Steve sucked in a drag, savouring the sudden rush of nicotine, then, lowering his hand, noticed Jonathan Byers watching him from across the parking lot. He stopped still.

Their gaze held until Steve, with a jolt of unwelcome embarrassment, realised his hand was still awkwardly hovering in midair where it had frozen in surprise. He let it fall, meaning to slide his fingers nonchalantly into his pocket, but hesitated halfway, Nancy’s exasperated expression swimming vividly into place in his mind’s eye, and raised it again in a curt, uncertain wave. Seeing it, Jonathan ducked his head, the sweep of his mousy hair obscuring his eyes. Steve scowled, feeling suddenly, abruptly foolish, but then -

Jonathan looked back up, clear brown eyes meeting Steve’s once more, unnervingly direct even across the length of the lot that lay between them, and nodded, his shoulders squared and his mouth set in a nervous yet decisive line. It was a small, brusque gesture, barely anything, really. Under his breath, Steve scoffed at himself, then kicked away from the wall and headed away from the school.

The stone left his hand, rebounded off the glass window with a soft *snick*, and landed harmlessly amid those he’d already thrown, back in the gravel at his feet. The light in Nancy’s bedroom remained resolutely off. Steve sighed, vexed, and kicked up some of the gravel in front of him until a fine layer of dust hovered a few inches above the ground, rising into the cool nighttime air. It was barely ten o’clock, hardly late; the winter darkness lay oppressively over the sleepy town, most of its inhabitants still a little too wary to venture

outside too long after nightfall, but Nancy would certainly be awake. Wherever she was.

Steve frowned, fiddling with the zipper on his jacket, aimless now that his half-formed plans for the evening had dispersed into the cool air like mist after sunrise. He thought about approaching the front of the house and knocking on the door, in case Nancy was just downstairs with her family and not out somewhere alone, but there was a quality to the soft, warm glow of the light emanating from the kitchen window that felt alienating somehow, self-contained and unwelcoming to outsiders and the cold hush of the night itself, stopping Steve in his tracks. Besides, he told himself, Nancy always went upstairs to study after dinner. If she wasn't in her bedroom, she wasn't in the house at all. Disgruntled and more than a little uneasy, Steve zipped his jacket all the way, pushing his hands deep into his pockets against the chill, and turned back down the drive.

It's not like he didn't know where she was. She had a few friends, but none as close to her as Barb had been, and none she'd be likely to visit this late on a cold school night in January. That is, none save for Jonathan, who was probably just as much of a space cadet as his mother when it came to keeping regular hours. Steve ruminated on this moodily as he trudged down the silent suburban lane.

He didn't mind her lasting friendship with Jonathan, not really. What the three of them had been through had bound them inextricably together; there was no place for mistrust, or enmity, not after the horror they'd fought together and nearly, singlehandedly, bested. And yet - Steve thought of Nancy, of the kindness she radiated, the stubborn ruthlessness with which she fought for those she cared about and those who couldn't fight for themselves in equal measure, and he thought of Jonathan's desperate love for his little brother and his mom, his desire to protect them when he scarcely had the tools to take care of himself, and he thought of himself, comparatively, and he felt like nothing. He wasn't even worthy of standing in their shadow, when it came down to it. Steve, so used to being a main player, had been reduced to nothing more than a supporting character in the story in which Nancy and Jonathan had been heroes, his bumbling intervention assigned entirely to circumstance rather than to any deeper purpose, any undercurrent of meaning.

And, okay, he knew he was a piece of shit, he *owned* being a piece of shit, but he wasn't used to feeling it quite so deeply.

Steve caught up with Nancy ten minutes before school started the next morning. She was standing just inside the main door, rummaging through her bag for some elusive object; too distracted to hear him approaching, she jumped when he appeared in her field of vision, offering Steve a small smile that he made little effort to return.

"Hey, Nance. You have fun last night?"

Steve had meant to keep the edge out of his voice, but he could see from the way Nancy recoiled away from him, her eyebrows beginning to furrow and the pretty upwards curve of her lips disappearing, that he hadn't quite managed it. He sounded sullen even to his own ears. Feeling his cheeks redden hotly, he bowed his head, stared hard at the fraying laces of his sneakers.

"I was at Jonathan's." Her tone was even, measured, but not abashed. "Helping him study." She turned back to her bag, delving into it again with renewed, if slightly annoyed, fervour.

"Yeah, I figured that." He cleared his throat abruptly, still refusing to meet her eyes.

"And have you got a problem with it?" Her voice was still maddeningly steady, even as her shoulders began to set into the fighting stance Steve had become so familiar with during the early weeks of their relationship.

Steve exhaled loudly. "Guess not, Nance." He shrugged, deliberately casual, tilting his head back on his shoulders without really looking at her.

Predictably, his forced detachment proved infuriating enough to trigger her temper. She threw her bag aside, careless all of a sudden, disbelief and irritation written large across her face. "*God*, why do you always have to be such a jerk about him? I thought we were over

this, Steve!”

Steve chuckled, dry and mirthless. “Yeah, well, sorry. I’m just always gonna be a disappointment to you, huh?”

Nancy made a low, angry noise of frustration, twining her hands through her hair as she spun backwards, her shoes squeaking loudly on the linoleum floor. “Don’t you dare turn it around on me. I haven’t done anything wrong, you’re not being fair and you know it.”

Steve sneered, hating himself for it but still unable to stop the flood of angry words rushing up his throat, pouring out of his mouth like acid intent on poisoning the air between them. “And what, you couldn’t have at least told me about your little study session? Maybe then I wouldn’t have been stuck outside your house like a loser waiting on you, you even think of that?”

There was a chilly pause. Nancy’s words, when she spoke again, were calm and exacting, her voice icy cold. “I’m sorry, but I don’t exactly remember inviting you over last night to begin with.” She stooped slightly to recover her discarded bag from the ground, hauling it decisively back onto her shoulder.

“So, you’d rather spend time with him after all. Is that how it is now?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, it isn’t like that!” There were spots of colour high on her cheeks. “But you know, at least he’s not afraid to talk about what happened. At least he doesn’t act like nothing’s even changed here!”

Steve flinched back, stung. “Well, shit, Nancy, I’m sorry for wanting us to be able to move the fuck on with our lives!”

“And I’m sorry I can’t just pretend everything’s fine! Like monsters aren’t real and we didn’t lose people.” She broke off, exhaling loudly and dashing a hand angrily over her eyes. “Whatever, I can’t talk to you right now.”

Steve squeezed his eyes shut, frustration and contrition mixing uneasily like oil and water in the pit of his stomach. The words “Are

you going to him again?" stilled, clumsy, on the tip of his tongue, just waiting to fall out and cause irreparable damage to their relationship, but with effort, he swallowed them back. "Listen, Nance, I'm sorry. I didn't want - I didn't mean to upset you like that." He uncurled his fingers where they had been clenched in a tight fist at his side, extending his hand out to her in a conciliatory gesture. "Please?" His fingers hovered in the air between them, expectant and hopeful.

Nancy ran a hand through her dishevelled hair, then sighed, a short, sad noise, dispelling the silence. "Not now. I'm sorry, I have class. I'll call you later."

This time, when she walked away, she didn't look back.

He didn't see her for the rest of the day. Once home, the phone remained persistently silent, and so Steve, for the second night in a row, found himself standing outside someone's house in the dark, throwing stones at their bedroom window. The first one missed, thunking loudly against the wooden windowframe instead, and Steve swore, casting a nervous eye at the battered front door.

"Knocking gone out of fashion, huh?" The voice came from just a few feet to his right, and Steve jumped, cursing again under his breath. Squinting into the darkness, he could just make out the burning orange glow of a cigarette, before his eyes accustomed slightly to the gloom, allowing him to see the slight, dark-haired woman curled up, catlike, under a large patchwork blanket on the porch seat. "*Shit* - I mean, uh, sorry, ma'am, I was just-"

"Looking for Jonathan?" Joyce interrupted him, leaning forwards until a shaft of yellow light from inside the house fell on her face, illuminating her pointed features. Her eyes were dark and shrewd, beady in the darkness, trapping him in place like a butterfly on a pin. She looked a lot like Jonathan, Steve thought. Quiet and clever, full to the brim with secrets and private mysteries.

"Yes, ma'am."

"He'll be in his room." She sounded calm, serene, and Steve felt a

ripple of uncharacteristic guilt, wondering if she recognised him, and if so, just how much she remembered about his interactions with her eldest son. "You can go in, if you like. That is, if you know how to use a door." She took a drag from her cigarette, exhaling smoke into the cool night air. "You do, I suppose?"

Steve, embarrassed, was grateful for the low lighting as he stepped quickly over the uneven boards. He thanked her as he pushed the front door open, and she acknowledged him with an absent-minded wave of her hand, cigarette still held at an angle between her fingers, humming a low tune under her breath as she turned her steady gaze back out to the empty yard.

Inside, the house looked much the same as Steve remembered. It was quieter, now, oddly mundane - less eerie, he supposed, now that it wasn't the home of Hawkins' only missing child for as far back as anyone could remember, the location of a breach between dimensions. Before, the old, worn furniture had seemed creepy to him, heightening the macabre feel to proceedings; now the entire house was bleakly small as he progressed down the narrow corridor, giving a wide berth to the scorch marks still marring the carpet. He could hear music emanating from Jonathan's room as he drew nearer, something loud and angry and guitar-heavy, and he hesitated fractionally before raising his hand and rapping his knuckles sharply against the cheap plywood door.

Nothing happened for a few seconds. Then, abruptly, the music stopped and he heard the soft thump of footsteps on carpet, shuffling closer. He took a preemptive step back just as the door swung open with a reluctant creak. Jonathan, predictably, looked bemused to see Steve standing in front of him. His hair was uncharacteristically messy, as though he'd been lying down in bed before Steve knocked; his sheets, visible over his shoulder, were similarly rumpled. Nervously, he flicked hair out of his eyes with one hand, keeping the other warily braced against the doorframe. "Um, hi?"

"Hey." Steve's mouth felt unusually dry, his palms a little sweaty. He swallowed awkwardly. "Can I come in?"

Jonathan started a little, his hand clenching reflexively on the doorframe before releasing it and dropping down by his side. "Oh.

Sure.” He took one step back, and then another, larger, until he was standing uncertainly at the side of his bed. “I haven’t got anywhere for you to sit, but, well. You can sit on the bed, I guess.” He shrugged his broad shoulders, a short, jerky gesture that didn’t seem to sit well with the rest of his body. “If you like.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks.” Not without apprehension, Steve moved through the doorway, tossing his backpack to the floor with a loud *thunk*. Jonathan, watching him cautiously, stood still in the middle of the room. He waited for Steve to sit, long limbs settling into an artless sprawl upon the mattress, before taking a seat himself, perched nervously at the edge of his bed like he was the one visiting and not the room’s usual occupant.

“So...” Jonathan licked his lips. His voice was quiet, slightly hoarse, even within the solitary confines of his bedroom. Like he wasn’t accustomed to using it much, maybe, Steve thought. Whatever the reason, it contributed to the strange, disquieting hush that permeated the household, creating an atmosphere that was considerably more intimate than Steve would’ve liked. He shifted on the bedspread, rearranging himself until his legs were folded smartly beneath him.

“So.”

Jonathan exhaled roughly, fingers twisting together in his lap as he turned to look at Steve properly. “Well, is there a reason you’re here, or?”

It was Steve’s turn to shrug. “My girlfriend seems to like you well enough. Wondered what I was missing out on.”

“And that’s - it?” Jonathan’s eyebrows were raised quizzically. Disbelievingly, even, although he didn’t seem fazed by Steve’s mention of Nancy.

“Pretty much.” Steve leaned over the edge of the bed, reaching for the bag he’d discarded upon entry. “Actually, I brought some books. Nancy said she was here studying last night.”

“You want to study.” Flatly.

Steve flicked his gaze back up, smirking almost involuntarily at the incredulous expression settling on Jonathan's face. "Yeah. That okay?"

"I - yeah, I mean, I guess." Jonathan shook his head, seemingly resigned, and stood up, brushing his hands nervously over the frayed denim of his jeans, before crossing the room to retrieve his own books from the clutter atop his desk.

"Hey, while you're up, you mind putting the music back on, too?"

Jonathan swivelled where he stood, shooting a startled glance at Steve - reclining lazily on Jonathan's bed with a black ballpoint pen held lackadaisically between his teeth - then nodded soundlessly, reaching over and flicking a switch on his stereo. The angry guitars started up again. Steve dropped his eyes back down to his notebook, nodding his head along with the music in a vacant display of approval, and didn't look up when Jonathan slumped heavily back down onto the mattress beside him.

For a while they worked in silence. Occasionally, Steve would hum along with the melody of a song he recognised, or Jonathan would clear his throat before jotting something down on one of the loose pages in front of him, and gradually the quiet stopped being strained and turned into something more harmonious, until Jonathan was laughing under his breath at Steve's off-key renditions of guitar solos and Steve's bio homework had been largely discarded in favour of discreetly watching Jonathan do his.

Jonathan had nice hands. The sweatshirt he was wearing was a size too big, and only the tips of his fingers protruded out of the sleeves; idly, Steve's gaze began to land on them every time Jonathan, exhibiting the total lack of self-consciousness he was only capable of showing when his attention was focused entirely elsewhere, mindlessly pushed his sleeves halfway up his forearms. At school, Steve always viewed Jonathan as wispy, insubstantial; close up, the illusion was dispelled as the false impression it was. Jonathan wasn't tall, it was true, but he was broad - broader than Steve, in fact, his fingers slender but strong, wrists dexterous and boyish. Invariably, within thirty seconds of his sleeves being rolled up to his elbows, they would begin to slip down again, slow inch by slow inch, until

Jonathan's fingers arrested their gradual slide and pulled them up once more. It was, Steve realised, his own hands fisted tight in the threadbare cotton of Jonathan's sheets, inexplicably and yet undeniably maddening. He was quite unable to tear his gaze away from the entire process, eyes tracking the motion of Jonathan's fingertips, until Jonathan cleared his throat and Steve started guiltily, accidentally knocking a textbook off the bed with a clatter. "Hey, it's, uh. It's getting late. I should probably head out."

"Oh. Okay." Jonathan seemed a little surprised by Steve's sudden announcement, but otherwise unbothered. He hesitated, rolling his pen in between his finger and thumb. "You want me to see you out, or...?"

"Nah, that's okay. Pretty sure I remember the way." Steve ran a hand through his hair, self-possessed, wanting to appear unruffled as he pushed himself off the bed and straightened his dishevelled clothing. "See you at school tomorrow?"

At that, Jonathan definitely looked surprised. Steve pretended not to notice, pushing his textbooks haphazardly into his bag. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Cool." Steve paused with his hand on the door handle, then cast a glance back over his shoulder. Jonathan's eyes were on him, still wary, but with a note of something else, too - confusion, maybe, or some emotion more complex, it was difficult to tell. Steve held his gaze for a moment, struck, again, by the clarity and directness of Jonathan's stare, then ducked his head, turning back to the door. "Bye, man."

"Yeah. Bye."

Steve let the door swing shut behind him. As he made his way back down the hall, he heard the music stop, then start again, synthier now, strange and sad and slow.

At lunch the following day, Steve didn't have to wait long before Nancy found him, marching stridently towards him across the

cafeteria with an indecipherable expression on her face.

“Hey, Steve. Have fun last night?” Her words were a deliberate, mocking echo of his from the day before, and Steve winced in his seat, making a half-hearted attempt to smile winningly up at her. Nancy shook her head in response, huffing out an incredulous breath, then pulled out the chair next to him and primly sat herself down. “You know, I really can’t believe you sometimes.”

“But that’s what makes me so appealing, right?” Steve, leaning back so that his chair was resting only on its two back legs, nudged Nancy’s knee with his foot, affecting what he hoped was a charming expression. Nancy, resolutely unaffected, glared back wordlessly. “Anyways, I don’t understand why you’re mad about me hanging out with your other boyfriend.”

She smacked his upper arm, not gently, sending him flailing as his chair careened precariously beneath him. “Don’t call him that, and since when do you even want to hang out with Jonathan?”

“Well, mostly since I thought it would make you happy.” Steve dropped the charm for sincerity, sitting up properly and reaching across the table to cover her fingers with his.

Nancy sat back in her chair, her expression an unsettled combination of stern and bewildered. She didn’t pull her hand back, though, which Steve counted as a win. “So that’s really what you were doing? Making friends?” She bit her lip. “And you weren’t just messing with him?”

“Nance. If I was going to mess with him I’d pick something way more fun than hanging out at his house for an hour taking biology notes.”

She gave him a long, searching look. Eventually, detecting no malice or deception in his face, she sighed, pulling her hand out from underneath his and sliding their fingers together instead. “Okay.” Her brow furrowing anxiously, she shot a glance over Steve’s shoulder to the big double doors that led into the cafeteria. “So you won’t mind if he sits with us for lunch, then.”

Steve, following her gaze, caught sight of Jonathan standing alone by

the door, determinedly trying to pretend he wasn't watching their table. His eyes didn't leave Jonathan as he spoke. "No, I guess I don't mind."

"Good." At last, Nancy smiled, her eyes lighting up as she leaned up in her chair and waved Jonathan over. Her attention safely elsewhere, Steve looked back down at the table, drawing in a deep breath. He was suddenly, inexplicably nervous; in that moment, being around Nancy and Jonathan together seemed infinitely more challenging than spending time with either of them individually, for reasons he could scarcely begin to articulate even to himself.

"Hey." Jonathan slid into a chair on the other side of the table, looking just as uncomfortable as Steve felt. Nancy beamed at him, and he flicked his eyes towards Steve, then away, his cheeks reddening slightly. The silence dragged out for a minute, until Steve couldn't take it anymore and shuffled his chair closer, the scrape of metal on linoleum making Jonathan jump a little.

"So, your brother doing okay?" Out of the corner of his eye he saw Nancy startle, either at his conversational overture or at his allusion to the events of the previous term, generally a topic he tried his utmost to avoid.

"Yeah, not bad." Jonathan's mumbled response was quiet, and he still wasn't meeting Steve's eyes, but it was progress, he supposed. "He isn't sleeping great. Nightmares." He picked up his fork, poked distractedly at his food. "But at least he's back, you know? For a while I didn't think..." He trailed off, looking troubled.

"God, I can't even imagine how awful it was for you and your mom." Nancy pulled her hand out of Steve's, reaching over the table to squeeze Jonathan's instead, compassion creasing her brow. Steve's heart thumped oddly at the sight, some unnameable emotion curling possessively around his ribcage and settling in.

"Well, you know, you were there for most of it." For the barest second Jonathan's lips twisted up into a wry, fleeting smile, his gaze on Nancy's hand where it was curled around his. Steve wondered if he knew how transparent he was. And yet, Nancy still seemed oblivious, although she had always been better at disguising her

reactions. Maybe she was concealing feelings, too, even; the smile she was giving Jonathan had an enigmatic, private quality to it that Steve didn't recognise, hadn't seen before. His gut churned uneasily and he pushed away his lunch tray, half-finished.

It was Jonathan who pulled his hand away first, his eyes dropping from Nancy and Steve as he folded his arms in his lap. With his shoulders hunched and his arms turned inwards he looked small, and again Steve found himself considering the contradiction between that and the wiry strength he knew Jonathan possessed; vacantly, he rubbed at his cheekbone, remembering the sheer force of Jonathan's anger, what it had felt like to have been pinned beneath him, trapped and defenceless between Jonathan's thighs with his back flat on the dusty tarmac. How humbling it was to go up against someone only to find yourself thoroughly, roundly outmatched.

Not that he hadn't deserved it. He cleared his throat suddenly, attention snapping back to the table.

"Hey, I'm sorry I was such a dick to you before." As apologies went it was brusque, but nevertheless it was an effort, and Steve forced himself to remain steady, fighting the urge to fidget in his seat like a chastised five year old.

"Oh." Jonathan's eyes, clear and startled, landed on him at last. "That's okay."

There was a pause, and then he grinned. He had dimples, Steve suddenly realised with a jolt; he hadn't noticed them before. "Alright. And I guess I'm sorry for breaking your face."

It was Steve's turn to be taken aback, his eyebrows rocketing upwards. It took him a second to gather his wits, hearing Nancy laugh delightedly beside him at his expression, and then he righted himself, running a hand through his flawlessly coiffed hair and lifting his chin up high. "Whoa, hold on a minute, whose face are you calling broken? My face is fine."

Jonathan let out an amused huff of breath, still looking at Steve evaluatively from beneath his lowered lashes, eyes glimmering with quiet humour. "Yeah. I suppose it is." And with that, he looked away,

the tips of his ears pink.

Which was - well, it was interesting.

"You know, he still likes you." Propped up on his elbows on Nancy's bed, Steve peered up at the ceiling, casually feigning nonchalance while watching keenly for her reaction out of the corner of his eye.

"Nonsense." Nancy's tone was light as she moved around her room, slipping out of her jacket and hanging it neatly in her closet. Steve's eyes followed her hungrily; oblivious, she toed off her shoes and dropped her bag on her desk chair before lowering herself down to sit neatly beside him.

"He does." Steve lay back on her delicate pink bedspread, circling her thin wrist with his fingers and pulling her closer towards him. "It's obvious when he looks at you. It's all over his face."

"Even if that's true, which it isn't, we're just friends." Nancy curled into his side, sounding distracted, her fingers tracing gentle circles on Steve's stomach over the thin material of his t-shirt. "So there's nothing for you to worry about, is there." Her fingers slid a little lower; Steve felt his dick begin to stir in his jeans.

"I know that." Steve rolled over onto his side, dipping his head to press a line of soft kisses on Nancy's neck, gratified by the way she tilted her head back to grant him access. "I'm just saying. He likes you." He nipped lightly at her collarbone, savouring the sound of her gasp as her breath caught in her throat.

"And I like you. I'm *with* you." By now, she was definitely out of breath, her body curving up into his ministrations. Steve breathed hot air onto the soft skin where her neck joined her shoulder, tracing a line down the centre of her chest with a single fingertip until he reached the top button of her shirt. He flicked it open with a practiced gesture, his finger continuing its distracting path downwards. "How about if you weren't with me?" Another button.

"Wha - what do you mean?"

“Would you like him then?” Steve kept his voice low, measured, even as the last of her buttons popped open and the sides of her shirt parted, offering him a tantalising glimpse of what lay beneath.

“I - oh - I don’t know, Steve, I can’t answer that.” She stifled a high, desperate noise as he flattened his hand around the curve of her ribcage, heavy and warm on her goosepimpled skin, and moved it slowly upwards to cup her breast. He could feel her nipple hard beneath the padding of her white cotton bra, pressing insistently into his palm. Gently, he tightened his grip, enjoying the way it made her entire body shudder next to his, then tugged down one side of her bra until it exposed a breast, dipping his head and softly taking her nipple into his mouth. She cried out and her legs slid fractionally apart, her thigh brushing against his erection.

“Would you want him to see you like this?” Steve’s hand travelled back down, trailing down her thigh and coming to rest on the inside of her knee, pushing smoothly until her legs opened further and her skirt pooled around her waist. Pulling himself up, he slid in between them, his crotch pressed to hers through all the layers of clothing. He rolled his hips, pushing his obvious erection more firmly against her, and she moaned, her head falling back against the pillows and her spread thighs squeezing him tightly in place. “You know he likes to watch.” His voice was a low, soothing murmur. “Would you want him to?”

“You can’t say things like that.” Breathlessly admonishing, Nancy rocked up against him, her arms twining around his shoulders and pulling him down for a kiss. It was sloppy, hot and hungry, their hips grinding together as they breathed hard into each other’s mouths.

Steve drew back. “Says who?”

“Basic decency, Steve!” She was aiming for indignant but her breath was still raggedly uneven, evident in the rapid rise and fall of her exposed chest.

“Yeah, but that’s no fun.” He sat back on his knees, sliding his hands up her smooth thighs and hooking his fingers around the waist of her underwear, drawing them slowly down her legs with an arrogant smirk. “And besides, that isn’t a no.”

Her eyes flashed dangerously even as she lifted her hips, letting him peel her panties off and toss them into a corner of the room. "I'm not the one who brought him up." Her gaze left his face, travelling down to the obvious bulge tenting the front of his pants, and she raised her eyebrows tauntingly. "Something you're not telling me?"

Steve shrugged his shoulders evasively, lowering himself down between her thighs. "I think it's kinda hot. The idea of it, you know." She was wet; he slid his finger into her, following it teasingly with his tongue. Nancy gasped, a hand flying down to grasp at his hair, and he drew back slightly, biting gently at the soft skin of her inner thigh as he pulled his finger out and replaced it smoothly with two, crooking them slightly upwards and feeling her clench around them. Steve's dick was so hard it was bordering on painful, trapped within the confines of his jeans; seeking friction, he flattened his hips down against the mattress as Nancy moaned breathlessly above him.

Once he'd started thinking about it he couldn't stop, images flickering through his mind as he went down on Nancy. At first, it was just Jonathan, watching on the sidelines, maybe with his camera in hand, until, suddenly, it was *Steve* watching as Nancy straddled Jonathan, Nancy's slim fingers tight on the wide expanse of Jonathan's bared shoulders, Jonathan on his knees in front of Steve, looking up at him tantalisingly, eyes mysterious and heavy-lidded. Abruptly, Steve realised he was on the edge of coming much sooner than he wanted to, his hips rocking insistently into the bed almost involuntarily, and he pushed himself up, dick twitching helplessly. Beneath him, Nancy looked just as wrecked, her lips bitten a deep red and her pupils blown wide.

Still, she managed to rouse herself enough to sit up, pushing herself up on her elbows and leaning forward with nimble fingers to tug open the front of Steve's jeans. As soon as they began to slide down his thighs she was pulling him towards her and in, the head of his dick rubbing against her entrance and making them both gasp. It was an effort not to throw caution to the wind and move the requisite inch it would take to push in, but Steve held back, reaching into the back pocket of his jeans for a condom, ripping it open with his teeth and sliding it on almost in one fluid motion. Then, holding himself carefully above her, he adjusted his position, thrusting smoothly

forward and into her. His breath caught roughly in his chest; panting, he forced himself to hold still for a moment, adjusting to the tight, wet heat that surrounded him, until Nancy hissed “*Move, Steve, god,*” one of her hands snaking in between them to the place where they were joined and the other twining reflexively, restlessly, in the sheets by her head.

After that, it was fast, a race to the finish, the ancient bed creaking ominously beneath them as he slammed his hips into hers, her nails scratching angry red lines in his back. Steve held off until he heard her cry out, loud and frantic, and felt the quiver that signified the onset of her orgasm; then, relieved, he dropped his head down in the crook of Nancy’s neck, his teeth closing hard around her shoulder as he came.

They lay together for a minute, still entwined and breathing heavily, until Steve pulled out and rolled over with a grunt, lethargically pushing sweat-dampened hair out of his eyes. He disposed of the condom, tying it and dropping it carelessly over the side of the bed, then became aware of Nancy’s eyes on him, her gaze sleepy but evaluating nonetheless.

“You really meant it, didn’t you?” Her voice was soft, barely disturbing the post-coital hush that lay heavily in the room.

“Meant what?” He quirked an eyebrow at her, pulling his jeans up around his hips but leaving them unbuttoned.

“You know.” She turned, rolling fully onto her side in order to face him properly, a mass of loose dishevelled curls tumbling down over her bare shoulder. “About Jonathan. It turned you on.” Her tone remained steady, but her eyes were vivid, keenly inquisitive in the low evening light.

Steve exhaled heavily, slumping backwards and rubbing a hand over his brow as an excuse not to look at her. He could brush it off, say he’d just been teasing her, and things would go back to normal in a matter of seconds, but for some reason the words stuck in his throat. Instead, he squeezed his eyes shut, pinched the bridge of his nose and braced himself for her reaction. “Yeah. I meant it.”

“Okay.” There was a pause, in which Steve would’ve sworn he could almost hear her brain processing the information. “Is it just the idea of being watched, like, generally? Or is it... is it him?”

He remained quiet and she sighed, half-exasperated and half-concerned. “Do you-” She broke off, apprehensive and uncertain. “Do you like boys, Steve?”

He wasn’t ready for the question, but he’d purposefully done nothing to prevent the inevitability of it being asked, and now there was no avoiding it. He took his hand away from his face, sliding it across the expanse of duvet that lay in between them, blindly finding her hand and lacing their fingers together. “Maybe.” He swallowed nervously. “Maybe him.”

Her sudden intake of breath was loud in the silence. “Oh.”

“Hey, it’s - I like you too, Nance. It doesn’t have to mean anything for us.”

“Really? It doesn’t mean anything that you like someone else?” She sounded upset, and Steve turned towards her, pulling her in close. “I just, I thought - I thought you liked him too, or I wouldn’t have brought it up.”

“I already told you, we’re *friends!*” She pushed away from him and sat up suddenly, wrapping her arms around her knees, the long expanse of her back pale white in the darkening room.

“Okay, then we forget it.” Steve pulled himself up too, laying a tentative hand on her curved spine. “You mean everything to me, Nance, I’m not gonna give this up for anyone.”

She rested her head on her bent arms, quiet. After a long minute, she sat straighter, running an elegant hand through her tangled hair. Her eyes looked suspiciously damp and Steve felt a jolt of horrible guilt, cold and cloying down to his bones, but when she spoke, her voice was resolute: “I need to think about this.”

Steve’s heart began to hammer a panicked rhythm in his chest. “Well, are we going to be okay?”

Nancy tilted her head back, her eyelashes long and dark against her cheekbones. "I don't know." Then she sighed. "Yes. Probably. I just - I just need some time, alright?"

Steve breathed out unsteadily, rubbing at his eyes. "Okay. Yeah." He pushed himself to the end of the bed, then stood, buttoning his jeans and pulling his t-shirt down. At the door, he turned, feeling hollow and unsteady. "I'm sorry, Nancy. Fuck, I really am."

"Sure you are, Steve." She sounded exhausted, but she mustered a small smile from somewhere all the same, softening the blow of her words, and Steve felt fractionally reassured as he left.

The universe wasn't smiling on him tonight, Steve thought tersely, as he arrived at home and spotted the now-familiar silhouette sitting cross-legged by the pool. He approached, his footsteps the only sound in the night besides the quiet hiss of the wind through the oak trees and the evergreens. Jonathan looked up as he drew nearer, his expression cryptic as per usual, fingers splayed casually on his knees.

"Hi."

"Hi." Steve's voice was short. He stopped a few feet away from Jonathan, but remained standing. He hadn't showered at Nancy's and he could still feel the lingering impression of sweat cooling in the dip of his back, knew that his hair was probably tousled in a manner highly suggestive as to what he'd spent the evening doing, and that Jonathan, his features rearranging themselves almost imperceptibly, was no doubt realising it too. "What are you doing here?"

"What, so you're allowed to drop in on me unannounced, but I'm not allowed to do the same to you?"

That's right, Steve nearly said, waspish and mean. Instead, he bit back on the words, exhaled a long, tired breath, then lowered himself down to sit on the cool stone slabs that bordered the pool. "Nah, you're cool."

"Are you sure? I can leave if you want..." Jonathan trailed off. His

voice had assumed the uncertain, nervous edge it had only recently stopped taking on around Steve as a matter of rite, and something deep inside Steve's chest rebelled to hear it, an instinctive protest that made him force a smile and brush Jonathan's knee with the backs of his knuckles. "It's fine. Really. Just been a long day." Beneath the threadbare denim of his jeans Jonathan's skin was warm, inviting, and Steve pulled his hand back quickly, guilt still lying thick in the pit of his stomach.

"Okay." Jonathan returned the smile, slight and a little shy. Steve's treacherous heart began to beat faster in his chest, and he tried not to feel like he was betraying Nancy more and more with every second he remained here, sitting cross-legged across from Jonathan, their bodies mirroring each other with almost perfect symmetry. It was entirely innocent, he told himself, but with the starlight shining down soft on the surface of the pool and the dimple bisecting Jonathan's cheek, it felt nothing less than illicit.

"Okay." Steve mocked Jonathan's reply, his voice a quiet murmur. Then, he let his eyes slide closed, leaning back on his hands and tilting his head back towards the impenetrable night sky, savouring the breeze where it caressed his bare skin and letting the ambient noise of the countryside soothe his anxieties. Jonathan's presence was comfortable, unobtrusive, and they sat together in silence as the minutes ticked past. Eventually, Steve heard Jonathan shift, and he opened his eyes reluctantly, watching as Jonathan turned away to retrieve something from his coat pocket.

"Actually, I came to give you this."

Curious, Steve sat up properly, reaching out a hand for the object Jonathan held recalcitrantly within his own. Taking it, he saw that it was a photograph, a small, square polaroid. It was a picture of Steve himself, he realised, and he forced himself not to react as he examined it.

He wasn't sure when or where exactly it had been taken, only that it was clearly from a distance. In it, he leaned up against a nondescript brick wall, dressed entirely in black, a rebellious strand of hair falling down over his forehead as he took a drag from the cigarette held lopsidedly between his lips. He was looking away, his gaze off to the

side, shoulders squared against the wall. To an outsider, he would seem distant, hard, the epitome of everything he wanted to project to the world, but - somehow - there was an undeniable intimacy to the photograph, an ownership that stated *yes, I know him, I know who he is*, that leant a sense of familiarity, a complex warmth, to the overall impression. This, he realised with a jolt, was what Jonathan saw in him; a softness to his edges that drew people in rather than alienated them. Seeing it, his breath stuttered in his lungs and his head swam; he felt as though he was standing right on the edge of a precipice, unable to take the step that would send him irrevocably over the side yet equally unable to deliver himself backwards to safety.

"It's okay if you don't like it, I just thought," Jonathan was saying; "I thought you might want to keep it. Or just see it, you know, I don't mind."

Barely registering his words, Steve let out an almost involuntary laugh, a harsh, guttural sound, turning the photo over and over between his fingers.

"You can give it back or you want. Or rip it up, it's just a dumb photo." Jonathan's voice cut through the haze. Steve looked up at him; he was crestfallen, disappointment colouring his words despite the positive inflection he was attempting to deliver them with.

"No." Decisively, Steve slid the picture into the pocket of his jacket, keeping his hand tucked possessively over it. "No, I like it. I want it."

"Oh." Jonathan's sigh was a sound of sheer relief. "Good, I mean... I'm glad you like it."

"I do." Steve shook his head, almost amused, a wry smile curling its way involuntarily across his face. "Yeah. I do."

The end-of-January bonfire was an annual celebration in Hawkins, and had been as far back as anyone living could remember. No one knew its origins, or its purpose, but still everyone gathered in the old lot by the reservoir on the last day of the month, crowding around the log pile for warmth as it burned down to embers and ashes. It

was a long-established, long-acknowledged tradition that the town's adults would go to gossip and reminisce, seeing it as a highly-anticipated break from their daily monotony, while their children went for the unadulterated excitement of being allowed to stay up long past their bedtime, shrieking and chasing each other in circles around the burning wood, and teenagers went to disappear in packs behind the trees that lined the field to drink beer, smoke cigarettes illicitly obtained from their parents, and make out. It was with this knowledge that Steve had dropped by the lot a few days previously with a 24-pack of beer that he stashed securely in the shadow of an ostentatiously large, gnarled sycamore tree, and it was there that he was heading as the sun dipped down below the horizon, blazing orange across the rural landscape, with plans to meet Nancy as soon as she could slip away from her parents.

He wasn't expecting her to be there before him; it was still early, the last vestiges of daylight dappling the leaves of the tall, ancient trees. Thoughts elsewhere, looking down at the earth rather than at the path in front of him, the sound of muffled giggling took him by surprise. He looked up sharply; Nancy was there already, sitting on a spread-out, unfamiliar jacket at the base of the tree, an open beer held loosely in her hand, laughing as she nudged Jonathan's shoulder with her own. It was Jonathan's unexpected presence that made Steve draw up short. He was bare-armed in a loose-fitting tank top, leaning casually against the wide tree trunk, looking happy; his mood, for once, completely transparent.

Seeing him, Nancy smiled, pulling a beer out of the opened crate and brandishing it at him. "Steve! You're late!"

"I am?" Steve, bemused, took the beer from her, their fingertips brushing lightly, and sat down.

Nancy just giggled again, her knee knocking against Jonathan's as she ducked her head appealingly, her slender form curving into Jonathan's where they were pressed together in the shadow of the sycamore. Jonathan looked as though he didn't know what to do with Nancy in this mood, but he was pleased by it, Steve could tell, and no wonder; Nancy's undivided attention was a flattering, all-encompassing thing, like a single ray of sunshine on a cloudy day.

Steve wondered just how much she'd had to drink already, casting a glance around for empty cans, but when he looked back, finding none, her eyes were on him again, and her gaze was completely steady. He raised a questioning eyebrow, and she merely smiled in return, brazen and mischievous. Her hand, in a gesture so smooth it could pass as unconscious, reached up to tuck her hair back behind her ear, then landed back on Jonathan's leg instead of her own, the pads of her fingers splayed, equidistant, on his lower thigh. Jonathan started.

Steve, too, was surprised, caught unawares by the sudden misplaced stab of desire that sent heat pooling in his loins, lightning frissoning up through his veins. Just then, the *whoosh* of flames catching on dry wood carried through the glade, followed by a few spaced out cheers and the fuzzy crackle of a boombox turning on. Steve, faced with a situation he did not feel at all equipped to deal with, sighed, and did the only thing he could think of to calm his nerves: he drank.

And drank.

A couple of hours later, darkness had well and truly fallen. Sheltered from everyone by the low-hanging branches of the old tree, the only illumination came from the flickering fire in the lot and the moonlight overhead where it shone its way through the widely spaced leaves above them. Steve's head was fuzzy; he lay on his back amid the dead leaves, surrounded by empty cans, mesmerised by the play of light over Jonathan and Nancy's faces.

Jonathan had barely moved over the course of the evening, but alcohol had loosened his posture, settling languidly into his bones. Steve found himself transfixed by his elegant sprawl; the lazy angle of his head, tilted back against the tree, the fluid drape of his wrist, balanced on his knee. His other arm was around Nancy's narrow shoulders, her head with its crown of silky curls resting comfortably against his chest. She had wriggled down for warmth and comfort, her legs stretched out atop Steve's abdomen. Drunkenly, he let his fingers trace a circle around her delicate ankle bone, pressing into the dip below it, imagining he could feel the pulse of her heartbeat through the artery there.

"You haven't, though, right?" Nancy was asking Jonathan, laughing, flirtatious, as Jonathan ducked his head bashfully, his face red. "It's okay, you know, I hadn't either, not until-"

Steve was drifting in and out of the conversation, his eyes slipping shut, the sound of their merriment oddly soothing, like an intimate voice in his head telling him everything was going to be okay. Everything around him was so *alive*; Nancy's blood, pumping imperceptibly through her veins only millimetres beneath his fingertips, Jonathan's skin, tan and unblemished from wrist to bared shoulder, the calls of nocturnal birds, the rustling of wind through the leaves, loud music and voices emanating from the crowds of people milling around the bonfire only thirty feet away. It was so different from the cold, dead anxiety of December; his heart seemed to beat harder in his chest in celebration, singing out in joy at the simple fact of being here, of existing in this world, living and breathing and wheeling interminably beneath a billion stars.

"Steve's the only one here with experience, then," he heard, and lazily opened his eyes again, turning his head slightly towards Nancy's teasing voice, certain he should be indignant about something but not quite sure what and not really able to muster the energy for it either way. "Whatever you're talking about, it's not true," he managed, his words slightly slurred, his lips shaping an amiable smile at the sound of Nancy and Jonathan's renewed laughter.

Soon after, it fell quiet, the distant sounds of conversation from the clearing beginning to ebb as the time ticked closer to midnight, and Steve frowned, pushing himself clumsily up on his elbows. Nancy and Jonathan were still talking, but it was hushed, intimate, their heads close together - *too* close, he thought dimly - with Nancy's hair forming an impenetrable curtain between them and him.

"Hey." Steve interrupted them, and Jonathan turned first, his expression attentive but not guilty or abashed, as it would have been had Steve witnessed the same moment between them even a week previously. Although, he was beginning to realise, a moment like this would never have happened a week ago; the erosion of the boundaries between them had been entirely Steve's doing, and this, inevitably, was the result. Understanding this, even through the foggy

haze of alcohol that permeated his senses, he let his frown smooth itself out into calm, implacable acceptance, the jealousy he still felt roiling in his stomach instantly turning into something just as heated but infinitely more desirable. Wordless, he extended his hand, moving it as Nancy had done earlier; casually, it travelled from Nancy's shin upwards to her knee, and then across to Jonathan's, the ease of the gesture undercut by the pounding in his chest. He saw Jonathan swallow, his eyes dark, and he tightened his grasp, quick and decisive, sliding his long fingers midway up his thigh. His eyes met Nancy's; they shared a look, a mixture of nervousness, contentment and anticipation, and then Steve drew back, letting his fingers trail down the soft denim and then away to safety. The atmosphere remained charged, sparking with tension, for a second longer, until someone nearby tripped over a branch and crashed loudly into the undergrowth, prompting loud, drunken laughter from their friends, and effectively breaking the spell between them. Steve flopped down on his back, huffing an amused breath, feeling again the effects of the beer in his system as he brought a hand up to rub at his tired eyes. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure you guys are gonna have to help me stand up."

They did, hauling him up between them, his arm around Nancy, Jonathan secure at his side with a strong hand in the dip of his back. In unspoken consensus, they headed for Steve's house, it being the nearest and also, most likely, empty, his parents customarily away for the weekend. Once upright, the cool breeze worked wonders for Steve's sobriety, but he let himself lean heavily on Jonathan anyway, the sensation of his arm wrapped around him entirely new, intoxicatingly unfamiliar.

Weaving through the woods, it didn't take them long to get there, the pool lights shining through the trees like a beacon drawing them relentlessly home. Steve fumbled in his pocket for his keys, until Nancy, laughing, slipped her fingers in and pulled them out for him, navigating the lock in the half-darkness with nimble efficiency.

They made their way upstairs with no incident, all three of them piling haphazardly onto Steve's bed, clumsily removing shoes and outerwear before sprawling out on top of the mattress. Despite the

heavy, cloying pull of his exhaustion, Steve noticed Jonathan's furtive, slightly stricken expression, and realised with a jolt what it must feel like for him, to be inside the room he'd previously only seen from outside, through the lens of his camera. The memory of it sent waves of heat radiating through his belly; their eyes met, and Jonathan flushed a deep crimson, undoubtedly correctly interpreting the look on Steve's face. For a minute, their gaze held, and then Nancy rolled over, taking a hold of Steve's wrist and pulling him down next to her with a muffled, sleepy noise of complaint. He felt, more than saw, Jonathan lie down on Nancy's other side, and let contentment fill his chest, drawing him languorously down into unconsciousness.

When he woke in the morning, he was alone.

It was still early, pale dawn light coming in through the window, making everything seem serene, clean white and calm. Steve lay still for a minute, savouring the warmth of his sheets shielding him against the January chill, then rolled over and sat up, listening keenly for any noise from elsewhere in the house. There was none, but the tangle of shoes and coats remained in a heap on the floor by his bed, tangible proof that the events of the previous night hadn't merely been the result of a strange, twisted fever dream.

Running his hand through his hair, he grimaced, suddenly remembering that he'd spent hours lying on his back in the dirt, and pushed himself out of bed, intent on showering before going off in search of Nancy and Jonathan. His jeans, which he'd been too tired and drunk to even think about removing the night before, had left deep imprints around his hips, and it was a relief to slide out of them, letting them join his crumpled shirt on the floor. In the shower, he closed his eyes, tilted his head back and let the pounding hot water sluice away his hangover.

After, he dressed himself casually in sweatpants and a tank top, and headed downstairs. The house seemed empty, untouched, but as he rounded the corner into the living room he saw them, curled up facing each other on the couch like parentheses, fast asleep.

Jonathan, larger by a considerable margin, lay on the outside, facing in; his body bracketed Nancy's in tightly on the narrow couch, his arm curled gently, possessively, over her waist, their legs tangled together and their faces only centimetres apart. Steve, looking at them, felt the now-familiar coil of jealousy, but now it was tempered by something more, something bigger, a sense of rightness that far encompassed any flicker of unwelcome, negative emotion he may have felt. Silently, he sat on the arm of the couch nearest their heads, his legs crossed beneath him, and flicked on the TV, calmly waiting for them to wake up naturally.

It was Nancy who woke first, with a soft, wordless murmur, her eyelashes fluttering against her cheekbones as consciousness gradually returned to her. Once fully awake, she pushed herself up slowly, careful not to wake Jonathan.

"Morning."

"Good morning." She rested her chin on Steve's thigh, looking up at him through her lashes. "Mmm, we didn't mean to fall asleep again. You were just sleeping so deeply, we didn't want to disturb you."

Steve smirked, not unkindly, running his fingers through Nancy's sleep-knotted hair. "That's okay. You looked cute."

She smiled back, her gaze, like his, falling on Jonathan's sleeping face. "Yeah."

The question Steve had been asking himself all morning was on the tip of his tongue. Somehow, he felt like he knew the answer already, but something compelled him to ask it anyway, quiet in the early morning hush. "Are we okay, Nance? Is this okay?"

She squeezed his hand. "It really is, you - you were right, before. I think," and she broke off, her brow furrowing slightly in thought. "It's like - we were missing something. Someone. And - and it's him." She pulled her hand gently from his, lowering it to softly brush the hair from Jonathan's forehead. "It's this."

Steve felt, all at once, as though an immense weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He exhaled, a long, controlled breath, then leaned

down, his lips meeting Nancy's in a soft, slow kiss. He felt her smile against his mouth.

Next to them, Jonathan began to stir. He blinked, once, then twice, sleepy and confused, then sat up, his shirt creased where he'd been lying on it. He looked at Nancy, her cheeks slightly flushed, and at Steve, still balanced above him on the arm of the couch. "Hey."

"Hey." Steve kept his voice soft, his gaze dropping to Jonathan's mouth. Nancy's fingers, resting on his wrist, squeezed slightly; whether involuntarily or as a sign of encouragement he didn't know. Slowly, Steve leaned in, waiting for Jonathan to pull away, to stand up, make his excuses, leave.

He didn't. Steve could see the exact moment the full realisation of what was about to happen dawned on him; he saw him hesitate, fractionally, his fingers tightening on his knees, and then swallow, sitting up straighter and very deliberately raising his chin to meet Steve's eyes.

Steve's fingers touched first, a gentle caress that trailed upwards from Jonathan's chin to the hinge of his jaw, then slid up, pushing into his hair and tightening their grasp until Jonathan let out a sharp breath, his eyes heavy-lidded and his mouth dropping open, the tip of his tongue darting out to wet his lips. Then, slowly, as though suspended in the silence, Steve's mouth closed the gap between them. The kiss was light, at first, just a dry brush of lips, until Steve used his grip on Jonathan's hair to firmly tug his head back, swallowing Jonathan's gasp and nipping sharply at his lush mouth. At that, Jonathan made a noise, a short, high whimper, and the heat simmering low in Steve's groin suddenly flared into life. He broke the kiss, sliding off the arm and using his superior height to move Jonathan backwards, pushing smoothly until Jonathan was caught firmly in between Steve's body and the stiff back of the couch.

The press of Jonathan's body against his was new, exciting; he was broad where Nancy was slender, the planes of his chest and abdomen solid, anchoring, while Nancy was, comparatively, light as a feather. When Steve pushed, deepening the kiss and twining both of his hands tight and forceful in Jonathan's hair, Jonathan pushed back, hands hot and heavy on Steve's sides, fingers clenched so tight they were

probably leaving small, dark bruises in their wake.

Beside them, Nancy was staring, silently enraptured. Eventually, Steve reared back, one hand planted firm in the centre of Jonathan's chest to stop him following, and said, "Kiss her." They were pressed so close that he could feel the way Jonathan's erection throbbed at the instruction; turned on by it, he didn't move back, so that Jonathan, pinned in place between his knees, could only writhe helplessly when Nancy took the initiative, leaned in, and kissed him first.

Steve had fantasised about them, about *this*, but the images paled in comparison with the reality. He was hard already, but watching Nancy and Jonathan kiss transformed his desire into something desperate, urgent. He palmed his erection through the thick fabric of his sweatpants, his hips twitching up into the pressure, then took his hand away, slid it over the straining crotch of Jonathan's jeans instead and watched him buck at the sensation.

"You can touch her. I know you want to." His voice sounded different even to his own ears, hoarse and deep. "Like this." He lifted Jonathan's hand from where it had been mindlessly balled into a fist around the loose cotton of Steve's tank top, and slid it up over Nancy's hip and under her shirt. She wasn't wearing a bra; when Jonathan's exploratory fingers brushed her nipple, then squeezed, she moaned into his mouth, her body shuddering between them both. After a second, she pulled back, crossing her arms and tugging her shirt off in one smooth, fluid motion. Then, with a sly smile at Steve, she brushed his hand away from Jonathan's dick, tugging expertly at the buttons on his jeans until they popped open and she could slide her fingers inside. Steve, spellbound, could only watch as Jonathan pushed into her tight grip, his eyes falling shut, his entire face rapt and beautiful with arousal.

"You wanna try?" Nancy looked at Steve, the high arch of her raised eyebrow a tantalising question. He hesitated, then nodded, his larger hand curling around hers until she pulled her own fingers back. Jonathan was impossibly hard, hot and twitching in his hand; Steve squeezed lightly, experimental, and Jonathan cried out, still trapped in place by Steve's body, flushed all the way down his neck. Steve leaned forward, the heat of Jonathan's torso an irresistible draw, and

dipped his head, biting lightly at the sensitive spot between his ear and his jawline until Jonathan was shuddering beneath him, his breath loud and ragged. It took less than a minute before Jonathan was pulsing and coming, hot and wet over Steve's hand.

Feeling accomplished and dizzily turned on, Steve retreated, leaving an impressive purple hickey on Jonathan's fine skin. Jonathan was a wreck, destroyed, skin shiny with sweat and come, his clothes dishevelled; Steve's eyes slid away from him and onto Nancy instead. "He wanted to watch, right?"

Nancy laughed, her eyes alight, wriggling out of her own jeans. As with her shirt, she wasn't wearing anything underneath. Steve raised himself from where he'd been poised over Jonathan's thighs, standing and wiping his hand, still covered in come, on his own shirt, before lifting it off over his head and throwing it carelessly to the floor; then, he sat back on the other end of the couch, his sweatpants sitting low on his hips and his legs spread wide. With one hand, he beckoned Nancy over, the other wrapping around Jonathan's shoulders and drawing him in close. They both watched as Nancy straddled Steve's lap, blithely unselfconscious about her own nakedness, grinding on the bulge in Steve's pants with her eyes sliding blissfully closed. Steve looked sideways, meeting Jonathan's eyes, then drew his dick out over his waistband, holding it straight up for Nancy to sink down onto. She waited, keeping herself carefully still, until he rolled on the condom he'd pulled hastily from his pocket, then slid down all the way with fluid ease, rolling her hips, making Steve grunt as she tightened, wet and hot, around him.

It was clear that neither of them would last long with Jonathan watching; Nancy touched herself as she rose and fell, Steve's tongue mapping a path downwards from her collarbone to her breasts, his hands following the enticing curve of her hips. When she came, it was with her whole body, her back arching helplessly as she rode it out, and Steve followed quickly, pulling her down hard into his lap and emptying himself inside her with a suppressed groan.

"Wow." Jonathan's eyes were round with awe as Nancy rose on shaky legs, slumping down next to Steve and curling into his body, her skin flushed and damp, and Steve smirked, hauling Jonathan forwards with the last of his energy and kissing him roughly on the mouth.

Eventually, they rose, the chill in the air too biting for them to remain comfortable only half-dressed, sweat cooling on their bodies. Languidly, they dressed and moved into the kitchen, where Steve made them an approximation of breakfast with whatever he could find in the cupboards. They crowded around the counter to eat, elbows propped on the surface as they made jokes at each other's expense, Jonathan's eyes darting rapidly between Steve and Nancy like nothing of the past week had quite sunk in yet, and Steve recalled Nancy's words from earlier. *It's like - we were missing something. Someone. And - and it's him. It's this.*

Almost like she'd read his mind, Nancy smiled at Steve, content; at peace, he smiled back, his hand brushing Jonathan's under the table. As the morning sun rose outside, nearing its apex in the winter blue sky, the last puzzle piece clicked decisively into place.

Author's Note:

title from simple math by manchester orchestra.

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